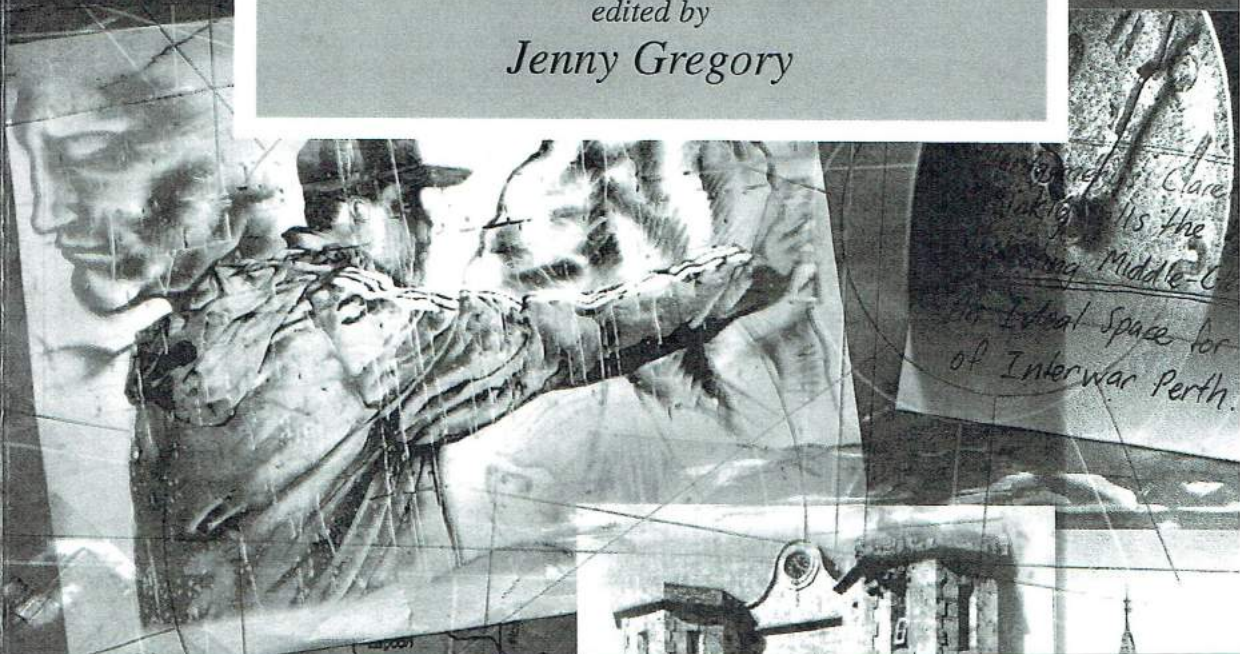


Historical Traces

edited by
Jenny Gregory



Richard G. Hartley, *Industry and Infrastructure in Western Australia 1829-1940*. Institution of Engineers Australia and Heritage Council of Western Australia. Perth 1995. Pp.162. \$25 from the Institution of Engineers Australia (WA Division), 712 Murray Street, West Perth, WA 6005.

This book opens the door on a world rarely visited by Western Australian historians. Rather than the commonly visited worlds of ethnicity, gender, politics or class, this book visits the physical reality of made things and the infrastructure which makes society possible. This is the too often ignored world which makes other areas of our history possible and it helps us understand some of the things which make Western Australia a place distinct from others.

This book came from the need to document the development of industry and infrastructure in Western Australia as a basic tool in the process of identifying and assessing the state's industrial heritage. It serves this purpose admirably by giving a broad sweep of information about all the industrial developments which took place in Western Australia from the beginning of white settlement in 1829 to the eve of the Pacific War. The text is divided into five chronological chapters with each chapter divided into thematic sections. For example, the first chapter covers the period from 1829 to 1849 and deals with the early colonial

industries of transport, flour milling, whaling and sealing, the timber industry, mining, and public works. In later chapters the fields of activity expand as the settlement grows and as new technological innovations reach it. Each chapter includes useful tables and notes which aid the understanding of sometimes complex developments. One of the most useful tables is the chronology which covers the major developments of each period. The book is well researched and detailed without being overburdened with detail. It is well written but it is not a book you'd normally read from first page to last. This is the kind of book you dip into to find particular areas of information and thus it is a very useful reference. No doubt there is a fair smattering of small errors in the book (I certainly picked three in relation to the development of air transport in Western Australia on page 82), but these do not detract from the quality of the fundamental issues the author conveys which reflect the reality of the times and the situations which then existed. Besides, the book is largely based on secondary research, due to the limited research resources available when it was written, and so errors like this reflect on earlier research, not on the author.

In general this is an impressive and worthwhile book. There are three main reasons for this. First is the amount of information which is brought together in one place. The second is the way in which the author manages to make material which could be little more than lists into a text which is enjoyable to read. The third is that the author manages to locate industry and infrastructure in the broad context of Western Australian history. Thus this book is a history of Western Australia seen from an industrial perspective rather than the usual political, social or cultural perspective. For example, in chapter 5, 'Depression and Recovery', the author begins with a good and useful exposition of the way in which the Depression affected industry in Western Australia and goes on to explain the workings of the unemployment relief system. In another part of the chapter dealing with wheat bulk handling this industrial change does not just happen, it grows out of well explained economic forces. Industrial development is thus linked to economic factors and political changes in a way which is too often missing from this kind of survey text. I might have preferred to see some exploration of the way in which many of the new innovations were introduced into Western Australia but that was possibly outside the terms of reference of this project. Even so, these issues need to be explored and I hope this book suggests avenues of research to other historians.

Lurking beneath all the dates, names and activities is a broad picture of a white settler colony trying to cope with a vast land area and beset by almost insurmountable problems of a small economy and tiny white population base. The result is a society which depended (and still depends) on primary industries such as pastoralism, agriculture and mining but needed to develop large scale infrastructure systems to become a viable producer. It is a fascinating story told in brief here and I recommend it to those who seek to understand the technological underpinnings of our Western Australian society.

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LEIGH EDMONDS